

Benny

Madeleine Kobus

I am one of four children, well, two children, no...actually four. My sister Miriam was born with some odd deformities. Weighing in at only four pounds, she came silently into this world with a cleft lip and pallet and brain abnormalities. At the time no one knew what was wrong with her, but we knew she wouldn't live long. I remember sneaking into her room one morning when I was three. She was sleeping and she felt so cold. I wanted to be a good big sister and so I covered her with a blanket. When my mama woke up I told her of my good deed. Mama ran into the bedroom, took one look at my sister, and dropped to the floor. I remember her screaming for hours. Even now I still blame myself for Miriam's death.

A few months later Mama was pregnant again, but after Miriam I didn't really want another sibling. If I had somehow killed my sister by covering her with a blanket... hell, I didn't want to risk that again. I prayed over and over that he wouldn't come. Well, he must have heard me, because he didn't. That might be the most evil thing I have ever done. He got a hole in his spine and died in the womb. His name was Jimmy.

By the time I was five I was ok with what had happened to Miriam. Then Mama came and told me she was pregnant again. When she was big in the belly, I placed my ear as close to her as I could get. I could feel something moving around inside and it made me giggle. Mama said it was my brother. I imagined all sorts of things about him, but also I wondered if he knew what I had done to Miriam and Jimmy. I imagined him up in heaven with them. I imagined Miriam and Jimmy talking about me and preparing him for the evil he was going to know. The baby-killer sister. So, I whispered to my unborn brother that I would always protect him. I whispered that I would never hurt him. I whispered that I was sorry. I wanted him. I felt his body push against my cheek through Mama's belly. I knew that he was my chance at redemption. I knew that I would love him forever.

Sometimes I believe that I actually felt my brother come into the world. I had been dropped off at the babysitter's and spent my time coloring and waiting. I imagine that when he entered the world I could feel him as if he were next to me, that he was already such a part of me that he might have been my arms or legs. They named him Benny. He was deformed like Miriam, but this time we had a name for the syndrome: Wolf-Hirschhorn. The left side of his fourth chromosome broke off and reattached onto some part of his sixteenth chromosome. No one believed he would make it to three, but he did. And then four, and then ten.

Now, at eighteen years old, he is still wheelchair bound and very small. He maybe stands about four feet tall if you stretch him out. With tiny limbs and wrists that don't turn over, he looks more like Kermit the Frog than a human. That description sounds harsh, but hey, you sort of develop a dark humor. It helps. Plus asking Benny, "It's hard being green, isn't it?" is pretty funny...don't worry, he thinks so too. He doesn't speak, but makes "jungle calls." It's a language he shares with only Mama and me.

For six months now, I have been away from my brother. I have been living like a paraplegic trying to get used to not having her arms and legs. The doctors are so amazed at how long he has lived, and no one knows how much longer he has left. It's not that he is sick or anything; it's just kind of like how dogs don't live that long.

How can I love someone who will die? How can I keep allowing him into my heart when he will just break it?

I drift around from place to place these days. I work for a while to save money, and then take off again. I am always avoiding home; always avoiding Benny. At night I come back to a temporary home and slump on a temporary bed. With a bottle of whiskey in hand, I stop running for a while. I imagine all sorts of messed up things. Benny lying in a coffin and what song will I sing at his funeral. I imagine how I will kill myself, or how I will go to an asylum. Or I imagine how I will be so strong and move on. I will become an empowered woman and gain strength from the loss of my brother.

I also imagine what Miriam and Jimmy are doing. Sometimes I think they are preparing my place in Hell. Other times I imagine them begging forgiveness for my soul at the feet of God. Sometimes I imagine them in dress clothes and hats. They are intelligent and have no pain. They are in Heaven and it is an outdoor pub. They sit together and drink Manhattans or something, and smoke clove cigarettes. They have wild debates about physics and socialism. I like to think that they are waiting for Benny and me, that they don't blame me for their deaths.

This morning when Mama called me in tears saying Benny was sick, I told her I was too busy to come home. She said she understood, and that he probably would be all right. I spent the rest of my day feeling guilty. It was just pneumonia! I mean... it was just pneumonia. And if I showed up I was going to get yelled at by Mama for smelling like booze and clove smoke, and... it was just pneumonia.

But it was Benny. And Benny and pneumonia were about as good a mix as beer and whiskey.

My brother is going to die, and I am going to live. I feel so guilty.

Why am I the healthy one? I promised him I would love him. When I see him, I will whisper that I love him. I will whisper that I am sorry. I will whisper that I will never leave him. I load up my car. There is nothing I can do about him dying, but there is something I can do. Drive.

Madeleine Kobus is a senior at Iowa State University and plans on going overseas after college to teach English, hopefully somewhere in Europe. Her true dream is to be a professional writer. She believes that art is something to be shared and should be available to everyone. She wants to spend the rest of her life sharing art with others and in turn learn from others' works of art.